Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

Testimony of the Steller Sea Lion Caucus

Before the U.S. House of Representatives

Chairman Don Young, Alaska

Committee on Resources

Chairman Jim Saxton, New Jersey

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

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Mr. Chairman, on behalf of the members of the Steller Sea Lion Caucus we thank you for this opportunity to participate in the oversight hearing on the management of Steller Sea Lions. The Sea Lion Caucus is comprised of the fishery-dependent communities of Southwest Alaska which are the closest in proximity to the Steller sea lion rookeries and haulouts.

The Caucus membership includes the City of Akutan, the Aleutians East Borough, City of False Pass, City of King Cove, the City of Kodiak, the Kodiak Island Borough, the City of Sand Point, and the City of Unalaska. These communities are heavily dependent on the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska pollock and other groundfish fisheries for employment and municipal tax revenues. The purpose of the Caucus is expressed by the following goals:

- Active support of Federal, State, and Local efforts to promote the long-term recovery of the Steller Sea Lion population. >
- Active support of Federal, State, Local, and Industry efforts to provide for a sustainable North Pacific groundfish fishery, and sustainable fishing communities. >
- Aggressive and continuous participation in the long-term Steller Sea Lion recovery effort, including the promotion of an open, public discourse on the National Marine Fisheries Service's ESA process, best available scientific and commercial data, and the use of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and the Steller Sea Lion Recovery Team in all efforts to recover sea lions while sustaining the Region's commercial fisheries. >
- Promotion of cooperation between Governmental and independent scientists, including objective and credible peer review of **all** scientific and commercial data, theories, and research protocols. >
- Promotion of educational efforts to explain the fact of the Steller Sea Lion decline, and efforts being made to recover this important marine species. >

The management of SSL is the most critical issue facing these coastal communities. Due to the seriousness and far-reaching implications of this issue, the residents expect and deserve a thorough, deliberate process through which the federal government addresses the SSL situation. What they have received in reality is something very different.

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of these Alaskan communities, I am here to tell you the process, or more accurately, the lack thereof, is cause for serious concern. Alaskan communities, as well as fishermen from Washington State and Oregon are at the mercy of the National Marine Fisheries Service, the ESA, and the target of Greenpeace, the Sierra Club and the American Oceans Campaign...and the odds are not good.

Through our testimony, the Caucus will provide the Members of your committee with an understanding of how severely the process is broken and suggest alternatives intended to resolve our concerns.

The SSL Caucus members understand the Endangered Species Act (ESA) places the ultimate responsibility for rendering Biological Opinions with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The statue requires the agency to "use the best scientific and commercial data as well as traditional knowledge available" but does not require NMFS to work in a vacuum. Inherently, the SSL Caucus believes the agency cannot work effectively in a vacuum but rather through an orderly series of steps, involving a number of parties working to implement a recovery plan. This plan should be based on the best information and designed to achieve appropriate and measurable conservation objectives.

Sadly, the main components of an orderly management process (i.e. scientific, administrative, and stakeholder) are ill-used or nonexistent. This is clearly evident in statements made by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) and the

Council's Science & Statistical Committee (SSC) and Advisory Panel (AP).

The NPFMC passed a motion at the December 1998 meeting which stated:

There is considerable scientific uncertainty regarding the relationships

between pollock fisheries and the Western population of Steller sea lions.

The uncertainty lies at the heart of concerns expressed by the AP and SSC.

The Council recognizes and shares these concerns. The uncertainty has

placed the industry at risk, and forced the Council to react to ESA

concerns in a very compressed time frame and make critical decisions

based on incomplete and conflicting data. This is not acceptable.

The Council's SSC stated at the December 1998 meeting:

In general, the SSC shares the discomfort with the speed of the process

expressed in public testimony and by others. The process has been

hampered by the SSC's ability to thoroughly review the document.

Further, it has provided less peer review than is desirable.

There is inadequate understanding of the roles of the Council,

the public, and the SSC in the ESA legal process....

The SSC continued to address the specifics of the Biological Opinion by stating "The SSC again shares the general discomfort over the large amount of uncertainty in the data and large data gaps. Uncertainty allows many approaches and interpretations, none of which can be overwhelmingly supported by rigorous science at this time...."

At the December 1998, meeting the Council's AP stated that the agency:

failed to consider a large body of relevant scientific information...

not consulted with, or maintained the activity of the SSL Recovery Team...

not been responsive to an internal federal policy regarding peer

review of ESA activities...failed to provide any analyses to the AP

to quantify the impacts of the proposed RPA's on SSL and the

coastal communities...not provided enough time for a through

deliberative process to address the final Biological Opinion...

and failed to include objective or reasonable criteria in a formal

recovery plan process.

Scientific Process

In 1933, renowned ecologist Aldo Leopold expressed the philosophy that the means to achieving a conservation objective is research. We agree - it is far better for these communities to live under a management regime based on the most rigorous scientific research possible, rather than just whatever is available coupled with a heavy dose of the *"Precautionary Principle"*.

Unfortunately, the scientific method being applied to SSL is inadequate for several reasons. First, the agency has failed to consider a large body of scientific information pertinent to meso-scale ecosystem changes and fishery-SSL interactions which is a requirement of the ESA and federal interagency policy for ESA activities. Second, the agency has failed to assess the efficacy of prior/pending mitigation measures through a formal deliberative scientific process. Third, the agency has elucidated no quantifiable differences between the projected impacts on SSL by the 1999 groundfish fishery versus the impacts of fisheries on SSL during other years when "non-jeopardy" decisions were issued by the agency.

I. Failure To Use Consistent ESA Policy and Best Available Scientific And Commercial Data

The NMFS is currently operating under an interagency policy which requires an independent peer review process to ensure the best biological and commercial information is being used in the ESA decision making process (59 FR 34270, July 1, 1994, attached).

Section (B)(1) of this policy specifically addresses circumstances when scientific disagreement is sufficient to warrant special review. The "Special Circumstances" Section (B)(1) reads as follows:

Sometimes, specific questions are raised that may require additional review

prior to a final decision, (e.g. scientific disagreement to the extent that leads the Service to make a 6 month extension of the statutory rulemaking period). The Services will determine when a special independent peer review process is necessary and will select the individuals responsible for the review. Special independent peer review should only be used when it is likely to reduce or resolve the unacceptable level of scientific uncertainty.

A 1995 report authored by UK scientist I.L. Boyd titled "Steller Sea Lion Research" is possibly the most comprehensive review of SSL research in existence. It addresses SSL research through specific terms of reference including a review and comment on current data, research objectives, and future agency recommendations. In the report, Dr. Boyd provides his own set of specific recommendations to clarify linkages between managing fisheries and other top predators, such as SSL. Oddly, the report was never mentioned or even listed in the agency's 200+ page Biological Opinion which included a reference list of more than 250 articles, technical memoranda, Masters Theses, symposium reports, and unpublished manuscripts (Boyd, 1995).

The fact that all NMFS's mitigation measures (current and proposed) are directed at the pollock fishery clearly indicate that NMFS has determined the pollock fishery to be the single cause of decline in the SSL population. In addition to Boyd (1995), we firmly believe the NMFS marine mammal biologists have failed to consider a large body of scientific information prior to issuing the Summary Draft Biological Opinion. This additional scientific information runs counter to both the NMFS' single hypothesis that the pollock fishery is causing the decline, and to the Interagency Policy on ESA activities which require the agency to "...use the best scientific and commercial data available." (ESA Section 7(a)(2); 59 FR 34270).

To the best of our knowledge NMFS has not considered the following sources of available scientific and commercial data as required by law:

1) There is conflicting information regarding the implications of diet and the decline of sea lions. Merrick (et.al, 1997) reported a highly significant correlation between prey diversity and SSL population decline. More specifically, as diet diversity decreases -- sea lion numbers decrease. Resident SSL groups feeding on fewer prey species experienced a more pronounced rate of decline compared to SSL groups feeding in areas offering a suite of prey species. Fadely (et.al., 1994) also implicate diet composition and prey abundance/acquisition in the decline of SSL.

2) SSL populations reached peak densities during the 1960's. Since that time, starting in the late 1970's, the population has declined significantly. According to NMFS oceanographer Dr. Bill Peterson (personal communication, NMFS presentation to Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission, October 12, 1998, Sun Valley, Idaho) the Gulf of Alaska and North Pacific region experienced substantial shifts in species composition, a direct result of oceanographic changes in the form of reduced upwelling, warming, and other El Nino-related events. These physical and biological oceanographic changes were followed by substantial shifts in prey species composition which has forced cascading affects across trophic levels, impacting SSL, piscivorus marine bird populations, sea otters (*Enhydra lutris*), and killer whales (*Orcinus orca*) (Alverson, 1992; Boyd, 1995; Merrick, 1995; Trites and Larkin, 1996; Estes, et. al., 1998; Merculieff, 1998). Existing research documents a shift in SSL diet correlated with this "regime shift", from one of small pelagic fish to a diet dominated by pollock (Alverson, 1992; Merrick et. al., 1997).

3) The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council

(NPFMC) recommended several alternative hypotheses be examined to determine the root cause(s) of SSL decline (NPFMC-SSC, 1998). The fact that the SSC has recommended investigation in these specific areas clearly indicates viable alternatives have not been satisfactorily examined by NMFS biologists.

The NPFMC-SSC list of hypotheses requiring investigation includes the following:

#1: Physical oceanographic conditions in the eastern Bering Sea and North Pacific changed in the mid-1970's. This change influenced the productivity of several species.

#2: Among the species that declined were forage fishes high in fat, including capelin, herring, eulachon and sandlance.

#3: At the start of the fatty forage fish decline, the W. SSL stock was high in abundance. The forage fish decline initiated the subsequent decline in SSL.

#4: Walleye pollock numbers increased as the W. SSL decreased and became the major prey of SSL.

#5: Pollock as a prey item are less nutritiuous than forage fish, to the point that SSL in captivity show declines in health when fed solely on pollock. By implication feeding on pollock is contributing to the decline.

#6: The present fishery for pollock adversely affects the availability of prey limiting the ability of SSL to recover.

4) The Committee on the Bering Sea Ecosystem (et.al., 1996) indicated the inability to adaptively manage resources (incl. marine mammals) in the region is a direct result of our meager understanding of the system. The Committee suggested a top research priority should be to more fully understand the relationships between ecosystem dynamics, pollock and other prey species, predators, and anthropogenic activities if we are to reverse declines in species such as SSL.

5) Research indicates increasing adult pollock biomass may actually have a negative impact on the abundance of small pollock (Livingston, 1993). Density-dependent cannibalism may result in a dampening in the abundance of a given year class of pollock. Predation by adult pollock has been shown to inflict a large amount of mortality which varies interannually. Trites (et.al., 1998) has suggested increasing adult pollock biomass could result in less (or at least, more variable) individual juvenile pollock available to juvenile SSL.

6) No supporting evidence is currently available which suggests the commercial pollock fishery, which targets Age-4+ fish (Hallowed, 1998; Hughes, 1998) has had any demonstrated impact on the abundance of juvenile pollock (Alverson, 1998; Fritz and Ferrero, 1998). Alverson (1998) indicates that despite periodic and significant increases (>400%) in the abundance of Age-0 to Age-2 pollock (preferred prey size for juvenile SSL), the SSL population did not respond to this positive trend in prey numbers.

7) Southeast Alaska contains three major rookeries. SSL on these rookeries are counted individually during stock assessments. In the western population, only a subset of rookeries is included in the assessment as "trend sites." Thus, all individual counts are reported in the eastern stock and only trend sites are reported in the western stock.

the eighth meeting of the Alaska Scientific Review Group November 18-20, 1998, AKSRG recommended to NMFS that the method for calculating western SSL stock populations be the sum of direct counts of adults, juveniles and pups at all sites and that the estimate not be reduced for Nmin (i.e. "minimum population estimate" calculated first by estimating the minimum stock size - and then reducing the population estimate further to assure that the true stock size is equal to or greater then the estimate). This adjustment would

ensure consistency between the methodologies used to estimate the western and eastern populations. There has been no formal indication the agency has/will adjust the assessment process to account for this recommendation.

8) On December 31, 1998, just three weeks after the NPFMC SSL deliberations, NOAA issued a press release elucidating the existence of dramatic large-scale changes in the Bering Sea ecosystem. Included in the release were references to extensive seabird die-offs, rare algal blooms, poor salmon returns, abnormally warm ocean temperatures and altered ocean currents and atmospheric conditions. Also highlighted in the article was the need for research to meet the challenge of preserving diverse populations of fish, marine mammals, and birds in this highly variable environment (NOAA, 1998). Despite the fact that NMFS representatives present at the council SSL deliberations were quoted in the release, none of these issues were ever presented by the agency for council consideration.

9) On January 21, 1999, NMFS advised the NPFMC (Pennoyer, 1999) which issues and principles still required council consideration. In the section "Pollock Trawl Exclusion Zones", NMFS clearly stated that fishing within 10 nm of the remaining GOA haul-out sites will be phased out for 2000 and beyond, "absent other management alternatives submitted by the Council that are both compelling and equivalent in terms of sea lion protection."

The SSL Caucus is deeply concerned regarding this stated position taken by NMFS. First, the agency itself has yet to produce any compelling evidence linking SSL and commercial fishing throughout the 1990's while disregarding a plethora of scientific information. Second, the agency has never managed to assess the benefit/harm of any SSL conservation measure. Third, in NOAA's FY2000 budget request, NMFS proposed a net *reduction* in SSL research funding of $1.08 Million, (i.e. $330,000 for the North Pacific Universities Marine Mammal Consortium and $750,000 for the US National Fish & Wildlife Service). The research programs that NMFS has proposed to terminate are currently examining SSL energetics, nutritional value of SSL forage and SSL interactions with killer whales -- all of which are key to testing alternative hypotheses regarding SSL decline. In light of these facts, it seems highly unlikely the agency will ever generate compelling evidence.

10) Finally, there is a growing concern over the lack of scientific accountability coupled with the use of the "*Precautionary Principle*". The central tenet of this philosophy is to allow for management decisions to move forward in situations where the data are less then perfect. Members of the SSL Caucus appreciate the concept of caution when exact scientific information is not available. However, implementation of a cautious strategy must be coupled with an articulated research plan designed to collect the missing information that is forcing the initial risk-averse decision-making.

Unfortunately, with respect to SSL, the agency is not being held accountable for developing a rigorous program, articulating research and funding priorities within in that framework, and considering alternative hypotheses and data. Any scientific information inconsistent with the agency's sole hypothesis of prey availability is being disregarded and research funding reduced. We are increasingly concerned the "*Precautionary Principle*" is fostering a disincentive for rigorous and open SSL research within the agency.

II. Failure To Assess Efficacy of Current/Pending Mitigation Measures

NMFS cannot determine the positive or negative effects of current and pending measures vis a vis the SSL jeopardy condition due to the fact that a coordinated scientific program is nonexistent. The SSL Recovery Team (SSLRT) was developed to review components of a SSL Recovery Plan (SSLRP), rank research priorities, evaluate research hypotheses and methodologies, coordinate SSL-related studies, and provide a basis for updating the SSL Recovery Plan (NMFS, 1998). Unfortunately, the SSLRT convened only two of the originally scheduled four workshops and has for all intents and purposes, ceased to function. The SSLRP has apparently never received sufficient funding to achieve full implementation (Boyd, 1995). To our knowledge, the body that NMFS has formally recognized as playing a key role in SSL recovery has not

been re-convened or even consulted on the current jeopardy situation.

During 1991-1993, NMFS implemented protective 10 and seasonal 20 nm trawl exclusion zones in numerous areas in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea. To date, NMFS has not assessed the effectiveness of these initial protective measures. The agency has publically recognized the logical need to reassess the effectiveness of these SSL protective measures before the addition of any new measures by the following statement: "Given the current understanding of the sea lion/fishery prey interactions, additional research is warranted prior to establishing revised management actions." (NMFS, 1998; see also NMFS-Alaska, 1998a).

Section 7 (3)(A) of the ESA requires that in the event jeopardy is determined to exist, the action agency shall suggest reasonable and prudent alternatives which would result in avoidance of the jeopardy condition outlined in ESA Section (a)(2). In the case of SSL, the record clearly indicates NMFS is not able to estimate the impacts on the western population of SSL for current or proposed measures with respect to the jeopardy condition. This is further supported by the statement in the NMFS DRAFT Biological Opinion -- "At present, our understanding of predator-prey-fishery dynamics is limited, and much of the information necessary to evaluate direct links between the fisheries and sea lions is not available." (NMFS-Alaska, 1998b). Clearly, NMFS cannot meet the ESA jeopardy avoidance requirements of Section 7(3)(A) due to a lack of relevant scientific information.

The NPFMC and NMFS has implemented additional SSL protection measures. For example, three mile no-entry buffer zones were established in 1990; seasonal apportionments in the GOA and Bering Sea (1991) pollock fisheries and GOA Atka mackerel fishery (1999); 1998 measures to reduce AI Atka mackerel fishing effort near SSL rookeries; 1997 measure prohibiting directed fishing on forage fish such as capelin, sand lance, and myctophids. To date, the efficacy of any of these measures has never been quantified. Fritz and Ferrero (1998) concur, stating "These initial measures partitioned some fishing effort away from sea lion habitats, but the conservation benefits remain uncertain." We strongly question any process that advocates moving forward with additional conservation measures when the impacts, positive or negative, of the current measures have not been assessed.

III. Failure To Quantify How The 1999 Groundfish Fisheries Will Impact SSL More Severely Compared to Other Years

NMFS issued non-jeopardy Biological Opinions on the Alaska groundfish fisheries Alaska in 1991 and 1996. Each of these opinions concluded that the fisheries were not likely to jeopardize the continued existence and recovery of the SSL (NMFS-Alaska, 1998b).

In December 1997, the NPFMC proposed a 60% increase in the 1998 total allowable catch (TAC) for pollock in the Western and Central Regulatory Areas of the GOA based on increases in groundfish biomass. NMFS re-initiated the ESA consultation process and concluded the 1998 TAC increase would not likely jeopardize the continued existence of the western population of SSL, nor would it result in degradation/adverse modification of SSL critical habitat (NMFS, 1998).

NMFS re-initiated consultation because the previous consultation expired at the end of 1998, and is therefore required before the beginning of the fishery in 1999. NMFS has yet to quantify how the 1999 fisheries will differ in their impact on SSL. In fact, NMFS has not provided any evidence that the 1999 groundfish fishery is any different or will have a negative effect on SSL compared to the fisheries in 1991, 1996, and 1998.

In conclusion, it remains unclear how NMFS can render an accurate Biological Opinion and provide effective measurable RPA objectives in light of the following: 1) a failure to consider a substantial body of scientific and commercial data pursuant to ESA and embodied in the federal interagency policy on ESA peer review; 2) a failure to assess the efficacy of existing/pending mitigation measures as part of a formal deliberative scientific process; 3) a failure to reconcile how the 1999 groundfish fishery will increase the

potential for jeopardy compared to other years when no jeopardy rulings were issued by the agency; and 4) a lack of positive correlations between increased pollock populations and higher SSL populations and between rookery protection zones and SSL populations.

Administrative Process

The agency has openly commented on the active role of the public and the NPFMC in a cooperative and coordinated process designed to resolve the SSL issue (see Commerce, 1999; Pennoyer, 1999). Since SSL conservation measures are implemented as components of council-managed FMP's, the NPFMC through its committee structure, and the public, should have full participation through the Magnuson-Stevens Act process. Unfortunately, the administrative component of the process has been woefully inadequate and is most assuredly not reflective of the agency's self-proclaimed open and cooperative position. This is clearly evident in a review of the chronology by which the current RPA's were developed/implemented.

The NMFS "Summary of DRAFT Biological Opinion" was available October 22, 1998. The October 1998 NPFMC SSC minutes contained no references to the SSL issue. Clearly, the SSC was not aware, at that time, it would be playing an active role in such a critical issue.

The "Summary of Draft Biological Opinion" already included a list of RPA's. The fact that NOAA drafted RPA's prior to council and public consideration, and in advance of a jeopardy determination clearly indicates the agency pre-determined a finding of jeopardy. The fact that the RPA's only affected the pollock fishery indicates NMFS has pre-determined that the pollock fishery was the sole cause of the SSL decline.

Despite the fact that the pollock fishery is managed by the NPFMC, no scientific information was given to the council upon which to base the management changes to the fishery. This fact clearly indicates that NMFS never had any intention of including the council or the public in any facet of developing the SSL protective measures in the pollock fishery.

NMFS staff informed the council at the November 1998 meeting that the Section 7 consultation process was a NOAA/NMFS decision. The council "could give suggestions" but that the agency would decide the jeopardy finding and the final RPA's. NMFS staff explained that the NPFMC would then be required to address the RPA targets at the December 1998 meeting. NMFS staff indicated the NPFMC would be required to meet the RPA targets by implementing changes "with some latitude" to the FMP, pursuant to the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The agency would issue an Emergency interim rule to implement the changes. Clearly, the council's role was relegated to implementing the agency's predetermined conclusion.

The NPFMC's SSC was informed by NMFS staff they would be expected to address the RPA's at the December 6, 1998 meeting, the issue of jeopardy was apparently forgone conclusion. NMFS did not provide the 200+ page Final Biological Opinion until December 3, 1998, leaving no time for a substantive review of the document. In fact, the SSC stated in the December 1998 minutes "The process has hampered the SSC's ability to thoroughly review the document...." and "Although the SSC was requested to comment on appropriate actions that might be taken at this meeting to meet the RPA's for the 1999 fishery, the SSC declines to do so. We were not presented with information to complete such a task."

Throughout the process, the NPFMC and the public were in the dark with respect to the existence of any process. The NPFMC's SSC minutes reflect a serious lack of direction provided to the council, by the agency. For example, the SSC stated "There is inadequate understanding of the roles of the council, the public, and the SSC in the ESA legal process...." and "All parties involved in the process would benefit from a clarification of the roles of the various bodies." (SSC minutes, December 1998).

NOAA's Summary of FY 2000 budget request (p.1-3) NOAA indicates that partnerships to protect and recover at-risk species on the West Coast "...were based upon the significant flexibility of the Endangered Species act...." and that these relationships "promote the economic strength of the Nation and enhance the

recovery of at-risk species."

The SSL Caucus respectfully disagrees. Not only is there a lack of a process and a federal-constituent partnership -- but the inflexibility of the ESA has resulted in two environmental lawsuits and implementation of untested SSL conservation measures which have whip-sawed the industry, increased operating costs, and most importantly -- compromised fishermen's safety.

Furthermore, lacking a measurable focused recovery program, we are no closer to enhancing the recovery of SSL and NMFS is concurrently reducing funding for future SSL research. This parochial approach has increased the agency's vulnerability to ESA-driven lawsuits and ultimately, the industry, to sudden and untested conservation restrictions. The future is clear -- Greenpeace staff informed the NPFMC's SSC and members of the public at the December 1998 NPFMC meeting that SSL ESA "pollock-style" litigation can be expected in the Atka mackerel and Pacific cod fisheries in the near future.

Stakeholder Process

The Steller Sea Lion Recovery Team (SSLRT) was developed to evaluate the direction and adequacy of research and management programs. It also was intended to allow for substantive input by various constituencies. According to NMFS staff, the SSLRT was not considered in the development/implementation of the Biological Opinion and the RPA's.

The lack of agency coordination with the SSLRT is alarming. Prior to the finding of jeopardy in 1998, the SSLRT met just seven times since inception in 1994. It remains unclear how the SSLRT fits into any formal agency process if permitted to languish in periods of inactivity. Since we believe a formal federal research program is a necessity, the SSLRT must be re-invigorated with a well defined role.

Additionally, the agency has neglected Secretarial Order #3026 regarding agency responsibilities to tribal entities for federal ESA activities. The Order indicates the Secretaries of Commerce and Interior will carry out their ESA activities "in a manner that harmonizes the Federal trust responsibility to tribes...." (Secretarial Order #3206). The departments are required to work directly with tribal entities, consider tribal concerns, and make available information related to the management of tribal resources. The absence of any formal federal SSL constituent process available to the Alaskan Native communities clearly indicates the agency has neglected the intent of the Secretarial Order.

Conclusion

The SSL Caucus submits there is a stronger correlation between environmental lawsuits and trawling restrictions than there is between SSL and commercial fishing. The only way to remedy this harmful cycle and insulate the agency from frivolous environmental lawsuits is to formalize a science-based research/recovery program, build in federal accountability, formalize the role of the SSLRT in the federal recovery strategy, and implement a formal MMPA SSL constituent process which takes into account Native participation. The overall objective of these program components will focus on implementing the necessary conservation measures commensurate with the best scientific information.

The SSL Caucus suggests the following recommendations designed to improve the management process for SSL in Alaska:

Improving The Scientific Process

- Formalize a federal SSL research program which incorporates a peer-review of all agency SSL actions, requires annual reporting of progress and research priorities >

- Formalize and provide funding for a peer-reviewed independent SSL research program based in Alaska >

- Create and fund a SSL position at the NPFMC specifically designated to work cooperatively with the agency and the public to ensure efficient communication and development of a NPFMC EIS process whereby new information is continually incorporated into the council's EIS process >

Improving The Stakeholder Process

- Use the MMPA reauthorization to implement a take reduction team-style constituent process to address the SSL problem in Alaska >

- Ensure that the agency is accountable and responsive to Secretarial Order #3206 regarding cooperation and consideration of Native concerns >

- Require the agency to specify and formalize the role of the SSL Recovery Team >

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